



# Playing with Language in Multilingual Classrooms: From “Shoes” to “Sjoes”

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## Abstract

Multilingualism is the norm in the world, and in places that are considered more monolingual, multilingualism is an increasing fact and ever more present in the classroom. Instead of embracing this reality, schools are often pushing monolingual policies that focus on acquisition of the school language plus a couple of high-status foreign languages, neglecting at the same time the less familiar home languages. It is vital for the pupils’ identities and well-being that the languages they speak outside the classroom are given a place within the walls of the school. For all pupils, multilingualism is important: with internationalism on the rise speaking multiple languages is an all-important skill to possess. *SJOES* – a Dutch respelling of the English word *shoes* – presents ways in which the wealth of language knowledge present, or even absent, in the classroom can be systematically put into practice. The multilingual journey’s starting point is collecting and comparing: languages, words, sounds, and writing systems. What is the word for

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*shoe* in your language, in the languages you know or have been in contact with? The journey leads then to sharing and understanding via doing contests and role-play, dancing and art-making, and eventually a performance for schoolmates, parents, and people living in the neighborhood.

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**Keywords**

Multilingualism · Home languages in primary education · Translanguaging and sharing grammars · Identity building · Inclusiveness and social cohesion · Inquiry-based learning

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## Introduction

Many, if not most, of the classrooms around the world are characterized by multilingualism. Maybe one or two, maybe the majority of the pupils, will be daily users of multiple languages, comprising the main school language, additional school languages, and home languages. This is because human beings are more and more on the move for reasons of work or safety. They travel from one location to the other within a country or across national borders. This high migration rate increases the number of languages present in work environments and accordingly in school settings. Monolingualism is transforming into plurilingualism, and monolingual communication is more and more replaced by bilingual communication or translanguaging, using several languages at the same time (see Extra and Gorter 2001; Cenoz and Gorter 2015; *Special Eurobarometer 386* (2012); Mercator (2018); Grin et al. 2018).

Dynamic multilingualism is highly tangible in urban classrooms, although it is frequently repressed by the language policy of the school. The monolingual norm is often the advocated approach. Research reveals that allowing pupils to benefit from their entire language knowledge yields better results in terms of cognitive development, identity forming, and also inclusiveness and social cohesion (García et al. 2017, van Avermaet et al. 2018).

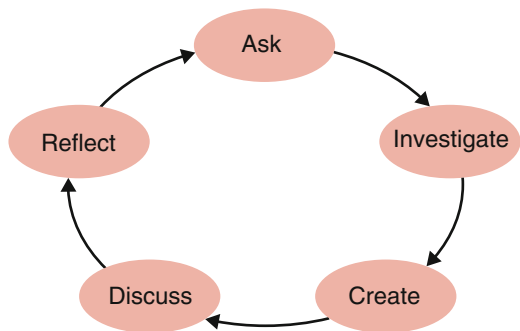
As for teachers, they have to accept that their individual knowledge never suffices to account for all issues that may enter the classroom, whether it be about language or other topics. Teachers have to accept that pupils may know more than they themselves do, and they have to let the pupil be the more-knowledgeable other. A simple but highly effective pedagogy to address multilingualism is playing, playing with language, with linguistic elements such as words, grammar, and idioms. *SJOES* is a program developed in the Netherlands for teachers working in multilingual classrooms (Helsloot and Daemen 2018). *SJOES* is a childlike phonemic representation of the English word *shoes*, in accordance with the Dutch spelling rules. Shoes, like languages, help you to move around and to taste the world's richness (Fig. 1).

In 12 lessons, *SJOES* gives the teacher tools to organize and structure the pupils' interplay of collecting data from multiple languages, of comparing the findings, and of placing them into language learning profiles. Based on models of inquiry-based

**Fig. 1** Variety of shoes.  
(Source: Author)



**Fig. 2** Chip Bruce’s Inquiry Cycle (Bruce 2008)



learning, on reflective thinking, as illustrated by Chip Bruce’s cycle (2008; Fig. 2), nouns and sounds, names of languages, and their places of origin, grammatical properties, and writing systems are gathered and discussed and are used for artistic creations like paintings or role-playing.

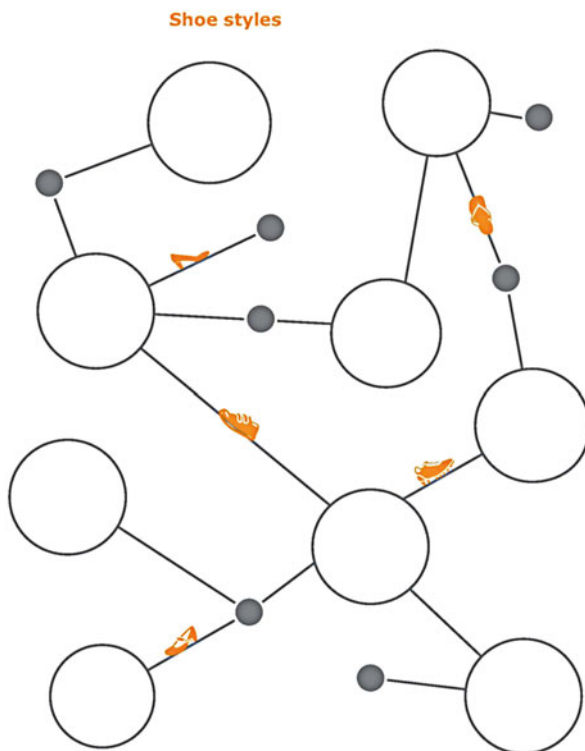
Let’s put our shoes on, and let’s start moving into this multilingual journey.  
Have fun! Divertitevi! Kyouzuru! Estamtea! Veel plezier!

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## Collecting Words

The starting point for our multilingual journey is *collecting words*, words in different languages. Collecting new words in other languages and comparing them for cognates and false friends stimulate pupils’ curiosity and make them interested in learning other new languages. What is the word for *shoe* in your language(s), in the

**Fig. 3** SJOES Shoe Styles worksheet. (Source: Helsloot and Daemen 2018, p. 20)



languages you know or have been in contact with, in the languages that are present in today's multilingual classrooms? Possible activities are:

**Shoe collection.** Collect words for *shoes* in various languages. How many different words have been gathered?

**The winner is.** . . . Choose the most beautiful or funniest word for shoe. Which word do the children like most? Organize a selection contest. Is there a final match between two most beautiful or funniest ones?

**Shoe styles.** Consider the collected words for the style of shoe they refer to, and add more styles in different languages. Think of sandals, boots, sneakers, moccasins, loafers, stiletto heels, pointe shoes, pumps, espadrilles, mules, slippers, and so on. Make use of the worksheet, "Shoe styles" (Fig. 3).

**Cognates and false friends.** Some words for shoes will sound pretty similar in different languages and will refer to the same shoe style: they are called cognates. The Dutch *sandaal* and Italian *sandalo* form cognates, although the main stress is on "aal" in the Dutch version and on "san" in the Italian one. You can make use of the list of shoe styles (Fig. 4) to let the pupils find out about cognates and false friends (i.e., words that look alike, sound similar in two languages but have different meanings).

**Make your own shoe.** Let the pupils create shoes by designing, painting, or modeling them. "Shoes for meester Willem" represents a drawing of stilettos and football shoes made by pupils newly arrived in the Netherlands (Fig. 5).

pantof	boty	ayakkabi	terlik
sepatu	papuce	stövel	klackskor
tøffel	støvle	bottes	Stiefel
butsu	xié	pantufla	sandalo

**Fig. 4** SJOES list of shoe styles. (Source: Modified from Helsloot and Daemen 2018, p. 59)

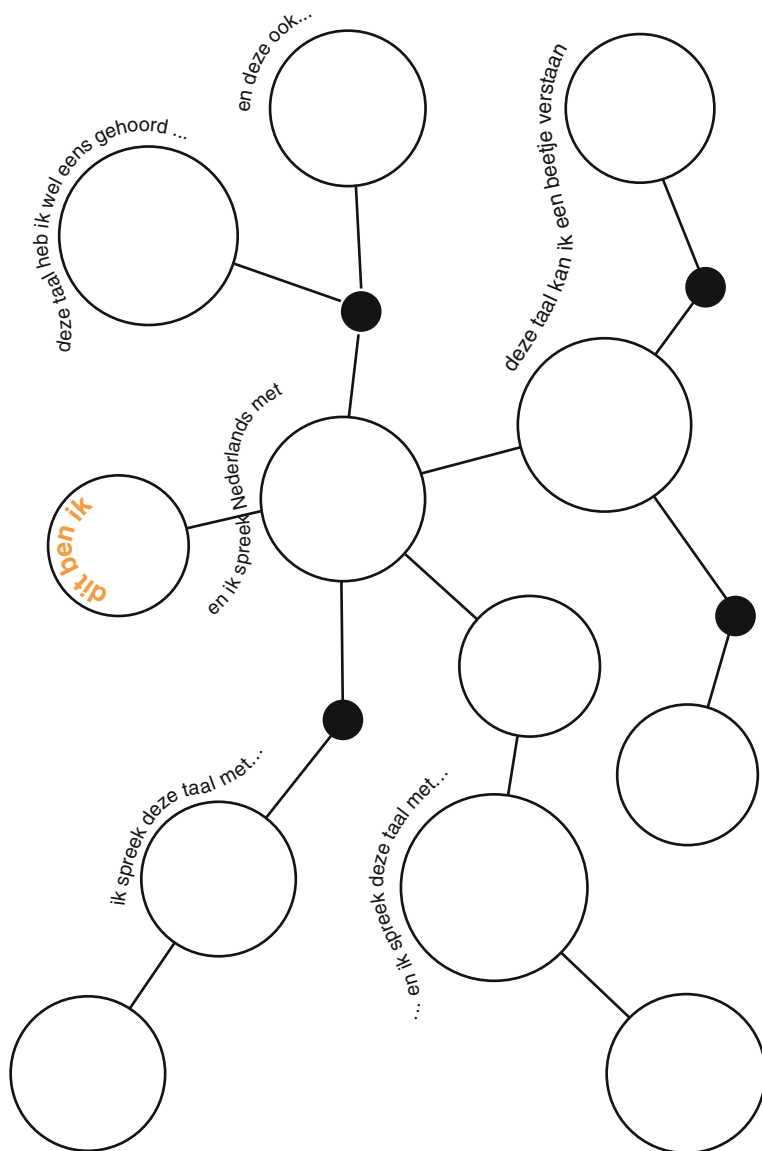


**Fig. 5** Shoes for meester Willem. (Source: Helsloot and Daemen 2018, p. 30)

## The Language Network

By playfully collecting words for shoes and for shoe styles and by comparing them and talking about them, pupils gain knowledge and awareness of their own language, the school language(s), each other’s languages, and other new languages as well. The question now is which are these languages that are known or referred to by the pupils? Their individual multilingual identities add up to an invaluable amount of language knowledge that deserves to be celebrated.

**My language network.** Each pupil makes her/his own individual language network. The first language(s), mother tongue(s), are fundamentally related to a child’s identity. With the growing in age, more and more languages will be added to its language repertoire. The Dutch worksheet “Mijn taalnetwerk”



**Fig. 6** SJOES Dutch worksheet, “Mijn taalnetwerk”. (Source: Helsloot and Daemen 2018, p. 16)

exemplifies a model for such a network (Fig. 6). The individual children get to map out all the languages they speak or know something of or have been in contact with. This reinforces their multilingual identity.

**The languages of the class.** The class as a group of pupils has a group identity. The next step is to combine all the individual language networks and make one big



**Fig. 7** Languages of a one 3rd grade class. (Source: Authors)

collection to illustrate the group identity. Figure 7 shows the languages of a small group of grade 3 pupils in a Montessori school in the Netherlands.

**Frequency hierarchies.** By investigating frequency properties concerning the languages occurring in the class, various hierarchies can be made. For instance, what does the *most shared language hierarchy* look like, in comparison to the *least shared language hierarchy*. This looking at each other’s languages stimulates a feeling of togetherness, of inclusiveness, and of social cohesion and allows children to exercise and improve their cooperational skills. At the same time, idiosyncrasy and exceptionality may emerge from this comparison activity. Individual children will be proud of their uniqueness.

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## Language Mapping

Mapping out all the languages the pupils speak – or are in contact with – soon leads to finding out that, more often than not, languages from all over the world are present in the classroom. Thus, the opportunity presents itself to delve a bit deeper into the geography of these languages. It is easy for pupils to assume there is a one-to-one relationship between the number of countries and the number of languages in the world. However, through some exploration of the facts, they will soon learn that this is far from being the case. National boundaries are pretty new and are mostly unnatural constructs. Languages, on the contrary, often have a long history, and although they spread easily, they are strongly localized.

**The geography of our languages.** Where are the languages we know spoken? What other languages do they speak in these countries? Do we know these things,

**Fig. 8** Newly arrived pupils, coming from Syria, pinpointing their languages on the map. (Source: Author)



and can we show or teach each other, or can we find out through the teachers or by searching on the internet?

***Pinpointing on a map.*** Hang a world map on the wall and use pins of different colors to mark the languages and where they are spoken (Fig. 8).

***Coloring a map of the world.*** When the information has been gathered, pupils can use different colors for different languages and mark the languages they speak, know of, or have heard on a map of the world. The worksheet “De wereld in talen” illustrates such a map (Fig. 9).

***Keeping up to date.*** When new information has been found out from a parent, friend, or the internet, the map on the wall can be updated. Similarly, their own map that they colored can be updated, and this knowledge can be shared with classmates.

***Discussing the linguistic geography of our country.*** Discuss which different languages are spoken within the borders of the country you are in. What is the national language in your country? What is a *national language*? Why do we have one?

***How many languages and countries are in the world?*** Discuss with the pupils how many languages they think there are in the world. And what about the number of countries? Which is higher and why? The number of languages is much higher (6000 more or less vs. around 200 countries). Why?





**Fig. 9** SJOES “De wereld in talen” worksheet. (Source: Helsloot and Daemen 2018, p. 24)

## Playing with Sounds and Letters

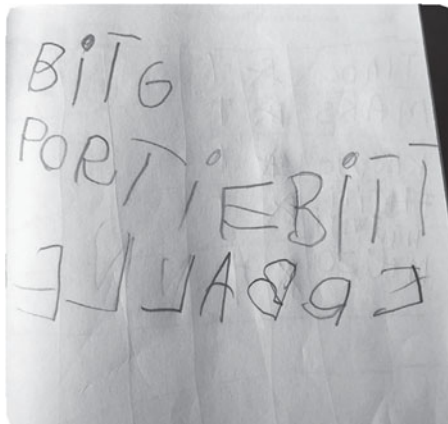
The main task for teachers in the first years of primary school is to teach reading and writing skills, to contribute to the phoneme-grapheme awareness of the children. At home or in preschool settings, pupils may have started to familiarize themselves with letters and textual representations, and some might be able to scribble down their name and other frequently used words, by copying from parental examples or from books. Reading and writing sentences and larger textual fragments is mostly left to the responsibility of the school teacher.

Interestingly, children often start representing sounds as three-dimensional entities: sound waves pinned down on paper can move from right to left, from left to right, from bottom to top, and vice versa, and even get “mirrored” (Fig. 10). This creativity at a young age is soon relentlessly dealt with by the red pencil: sounds move in one way, unidirectional, in one or another writing system.

Many playful activities can be done with children to fine-tune their hearing properties, to increase their ability to recognize phonemes, and to understand the rule-driven world of writing, graphemes, and spelling. Add to the school language the other languages present in the group.

**Chinese whispers.** A pupil picks a word for shoe in silence and whispers it in the ear of a neighbor, who in turn whispers it to another neighbor, and so on, until the end of the circle is reached. How similar or dissimilar are the original and final

**Fig. 10** Mitza (5 years) wrote down what her father ordered at the bar, i.e., a Dutch specialty, a portion of meatballs, *portie bitterballen*



tokens to one another? Which sounds are still there? Which have been subject to a sound change?

**Doing phonology.** In the game “The Winner Is. . .” (see above), the most beautiful or funniest words have been chosen among the collected words for shoe. Reconsider the winners, and ask the children *why* they chose these. Is it the combination of vowels and consonants, the consonant clusters, the rhythmic profile of the word, the number of syllables, the strangeness or rather familiarity of the sounds, the melody or tones? These are the basic phonological elements of the world’s syllable and word structures.

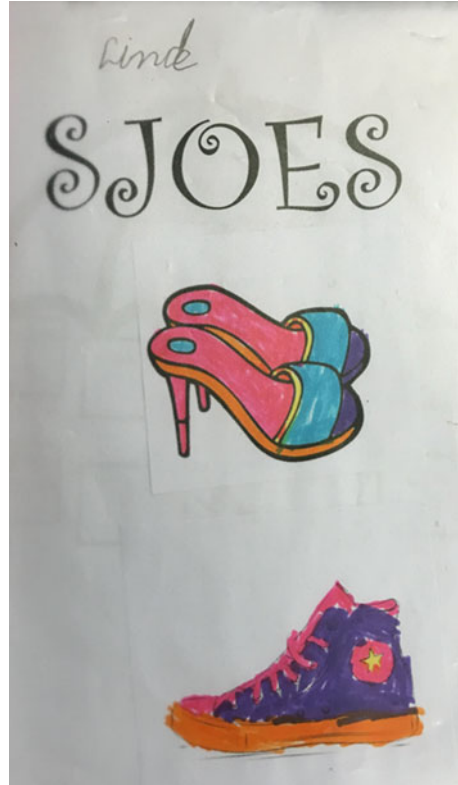
**From speaking to writing.** Now the most challenging part starts. With all those words in different languages, how can we write them down? In what writing system? We take the Latin alphabet, the one used by the English language. And do we take the American English spelling or rather the British English, or the Dutch spelling system? Choose the one you or your pupils prefer, or start with the spelling system of the language of schooling, passing to the French one, or to the Arabic alphabet or Cyrillic. Let the pupils write down as many words for shoe in My SJOES-book (Fig. 11), using different writing and spelling systems.

You may repeat the above activities a number of times. By collecting words in different languages and trying to write them down, the cognitive skills of the children are greatly stimulated. They become sensible to phoneme-grapheme relationships and to the conventional property by nature of the process of writing.

## Language Families

The words for shoes that have been collected and compared so far gave rise to the recognition of word similarity or dissimilarity. The cognate words often derive from languages that belong to the same language family. There are a great many language families in the world. The most well-known and a very large one is the Indo-European language family. However, on other continents such as South

**Fig. 11** One student’s SJOES workbook



America, there are a large number of very small language families. The topic of linguistic familiarity can be explored with the pupils through a number of activities.

**Collecting mums and dads.** The pupils collect the different words for *mum* and *dad* (Fig. 12). They can either collect them through their peers that speak other languages, through information from the teacher or by looking on the internet. They will likely find that the words for *mum* and *dad* are very similar in most languages, but not in all.

**Collecting mothers and fathers.** The next step is to collect the words for *mother* and *father*. When we put them all together, we see that the words have started to diverge and are becoming more complex and dissimilar.

**Collecting other relatives.** The above activities can be repeated with words for other relatives, and now the words are becoming even more dissimilar. Can the pupils still find words that look alike?

**Discussing language families.** Once all these words have been collected and compared, they can be grouped in accordance with their similarity. Similar words most likely come from languages that belong to the same language family. But how can we define a language family? And how do we know which languages belong to which language families? All these questions can be explored with the pupils. As a

Woorden voor mamma in andere talen	Woorden voor pappa in andere talen
• Mamma, Mor Deens	• Far, papa Deens
• Mama, Mutti Duits	• Papa, pati Duits
• Mummy Engels	• Daddy Engels
• Äiti Fins	• Isä Fins
• Maman Frans	• Papa Frans
• Mem Fries	• Heit Fries
• Mama, Anya Hongaars	• Apuka, papa Hongaars
• Mama, Ibu Indonesisch	• Ayah Indonesisch
• Mamma Italiaans	• Papà, babbo Italiaans
• Mama, matka Pools	• Tatús, tata Pools
• Mamă Roemeens	• Tata Roemeens
• Mama Spaans	• Papa Spaans
• Anne Turks	• Baba Turks

**Fig. 12** Words for *mum* and *dad*. (Source: Authors, p. 34)

teacher, you have to realize that the answers to these questions are very complex and far from completely resolved by linguists.

**Languages die and new ones are born.** Like people in human families, languages die when people cease to speak them, and new languages are born from language contact. When two (groups of) people who speak different languages come in close contact with one another, they might unknowingly create a new language by mixing parts of the two languages. Other examples of new languages are programming languages such as Java and C++, or “street languages.” These topics can also be shared and discussed with the pupils. What do they think about it? How do they feel about languages dying out and new ones being born or discovered? Do they think programming languages are languages or not? And why?

By addressing the topic of relatedness between languages, the pupils might find out that the languages they speak are related to each other. This can strengthen the social cohesion between the pupils. On top of that, they gain an awareness of how language is something that is not static but has changed over time and still is changing and moving.

## Verbs of Motion

The activities of collecting and comparing are at the very heart of inquiry-based or investigative learning. The pupils are little researchers and explorers in the making. To enrich a child’s vocabulary is another main task of primary school teachers. The meanings of words are taught, but also their argument structure and semantic values. Take the verb, take verbs of motion expressing the actions we do with our shoes on: walking, dancing, running, cycling, etc. Let the pupils play with these verbs of motion. And again, in addition to the language of schooling, consider all other languages present in the classroom or selected by the pupils to take part in the play.

Nederlands	Zweeds	Frans	Duits	Engels	Turks	Fins	Italiaans
Rennen	Springa	Courir	Rennen	Run	Koşmak	Juosta	Correre
Springen	Hoppa	Sauter	Springen	Jump	Zıplamak	Hypätä	Saltare
Sloffen	Knega	Traîner les pieds	Schlurfen	Shuffle	Ayak sürümek	Laahustaa	Acciabbattare
Dansen	Dansa	Danser	Tanzen	Dance	Dans etmek	Tanssia	Danzare
Stampen	Stampa fötter	Frapper du pied	Strampeln	Stamp one's foot	Tepinmek	Polkea	Scalciare

**Fig. 13** Words of motion. (Source: Authors)

**Move! Run!** Collect verbs of motion related to shoes. Collect them in various languages, and put them together on the basis of their meaning (Fig. 13).

**Slow motion.** Discuss the verbs according to their moving properties, the manner, and the path of the motion, and regroup them accordingly: (a) Is it a slow movement or a fast one? (b) Is it repetitive or continuing? (c) What forms are made by the movements? A straight line or circles? Does it go forward or backward?

**Guess the movement.** Pupils are invited to express through mime gestures the verbs of motion. The others have to guess the correct verb.

**Collecting verbs belonging to sports.** What kind of movements characterize skating, swimming, playing chess, and so on. Do all languages of the pupils in the class have verbs for these sports activities?

**Dance performance.** You may organize a dance performance in which the verbs of motion are illustrated (Fig. 14). Use different sorts of shoes or footwear.

## Writing Systems

The pupils have already busied themselves trying to write down new words in the letters and according to the spelling conventions that they are learning in school. There are, however, many more writing systems in the world, and the chances are that the words they have written down look completely unrecognizable in the corresponding writing systems. The topic of writing systems can be explored in different ways.

**What is writing?** Start with writing. What is it? Can we write with a pencil on the blackboard? Can we just scribble something down? No, we have to use specific tools fitting the materials we are writing on. Chalk for blackboards, pen or pencil for paper, your digits for a keyboard, and so on. And yes, we can invent our own writing system, but if you want someone else to be able to read your amiable reflections, you have to use a shared system. It might be a system based on letters but also based on images.

**Praise the alphabet!** A system based on letters is called an alphabet. The letters represent sounds, that is, vowels and consonants. But it may be very difficult to write down a sequence of sounds. And the same word may be pronounced in different ways, according to the region a person is coming from. Let the pupils try to write down different pronunciations of the same word.



**Fig. 14** Dance performance illustrating verbs of motion. (Source: Authors)

**Spelling conventions.** Why do we write down English as *English* and not as *inglisj* or *&\*()'#*? Can we do without spelling mistakes? No, we cannot, unfortunately, because national language institutes sanctioned by the government have agreed upon imposing very specific spelling conventions.

**No vowels?** Can we leave out the vowels? You can still read it. Can we leave out the consonants? Can we write in the opposite direction? The pupils can try these things out among themselves.

**Other alphabets.** Show examples of other alphabets such as Greek and Cyrillic but also Arabic and Hebrew which are written from right to left and have the vowels represented in a different way.

**Other writing systems.** Show examples of other writing systems such as the Japanese syllabic writing system or the Chinese pictographic one (Fig. 15).

**Can you write like this?** Now it is the pupils' turn. Do they know another writing system? Can they share it with the class? Examples can be shared by the teacher, and the pupils can copy them, preferably on a big piece of paper and using different materials such as paint brushes, crayons, and big markers (Fig. 16).

Discussing the conventions surrounding writing in the school language can strengthen the children's own writing skills as they become more overtly aware of the rules that are in place for that language. They practice their writing in a different more playful way and thus refine them. The realization that some of the pupils in the class who speak another language might have to learn to read and write in another writing system altogether can stimulate a feeling of respect and thus increase inclusiveness and social cohesion within the group.

## Performing

Collecting and comparing linguistic elements from various languages requires a follow-up by showing the results. That is, create posters or pieces of art, perform theatrical acts, and display books and notebooks: they all demonstrate and illustrate

**Fig. 15** SJOES Schrijf schoen worksheet shows a variety of alphabets. (Helsloot and Daemen 2018, p. 52)

**Schrijf schoen** Werkblad 10

Turks: <b>ayakkabı</b>	
Arabisch: أحذاء	
Russisch: <b>обувь</b>	
Chinees: 鞋	
Grieks: <b>παπούτσι</b>	

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**Fig. 16** Students’ writing in various alphabets. (Source: Authors)





**Fig. 17** Student showing the results of her SJOES poster. (Source: Authors)

the products made either by the individual pupil or by the whole group. And obviously, no performances without an audience! So make a plan, invite parents and other family members, and invite pupils and teachers from other classrooms, and maybe also people living in the neighborhood, part of the same community (Fig. 17). Some suggestions for acts and themes are:

***A piece of street art: the language network wall.*** All the languages present in the classroom or in some way related to the pupils or to the wider school community are reflected on the wall. Geographic as well as quantitative information in the form of charts may be given. We have the world in our classroom!

***In a shoe shop in a foreign country.*** Perform the selling and buying of a pair of shoes in the appropriate language. Provide a list of words and sentences that might be needed. And be sure to engage all pupils. Sufficient rehearsing is required in order to present loud and clear performances.

***An exhibition of the shoe paintings.*** Create a gallery wall with the paintings, and let the pupils choose a gallery owner to give explanations on the pieces of art. The pieces might even be “sold” in an auction.

***A dance performance.*** The Dutch have their *klompendans*, the wooden shoe dance. A Russian ballet on pointe shoes is rather more sophisticated.

***A language class.*** Learning to count in Urdu, or learning to say “see you tomorrow” in Lingala? Pupils offer short trainings in their mother tongue.

***Fairy tales.*** Reading aloud a (fragment of a) well-known fairy tale, like Cinderella or Puss-in-Boots in the language of schooling as well as in another language in parallel, can also be done, with a simultaneous performance alongside.



## Conclusion

Listening to each other, asking for information, collecting known and unknown forms, and writing down words in their own language and in those of classmates are extremely joyful and rewarding activities. And when comparing the different forms in the different languages, children are implicitly learning about the structure of their own language and the school language. They are gaining insight into how language works: a vital metacognitive skill. Through these activities, the pupils become aware that learning another language, or learning about another language for that matter, does not have to involve tedious lessons.

Applying these games and methods of language comparison in the classroom is not only a fun thing to do and beneficial to pupils’ individual identities and their group identity; there are also other effects and benefits. These range from specific skills such as an increased ability to identify sounds in a foreign language or a foreign language by its sounds, to more general knowledge about language and culture. There is enough reason for teachers and schools to rethink their monolingual policies and start being more inclusive and encouraging toward multilingualism. After all, speaking more than one language is the norm in the world; let it be the norm in the classrooms too!

More proposals for classroom activities can be found in Garcia and Kleyn (2016), various publications on plurilingual education by the European Council for Modern Languages (visit [www.ECML.at](http://www.ECML.at)), Education of International Newly Arrived Migrant Pupils (visit [EDINAplatform.eu/en](http://EDINAplatform.eu/en)), and Karjin Helsloot’s *Taaltrouters: Taaltrouters Abroad*, European Lingua Project on Multilingualism for pupils in primary and secondary schools with versions in Dutch, Frisian, German, Swedish, and Finnish (visit [www.studiotaalwetenschap.nl](http://www.studiotaalwetenschap.nl) and follow the links for Taaltrouters, downloads).

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